People + Planet

Eco’Services and Circular by Steelcase: a new economic model

Steelcase confirms its commitment to the circular economy in France by enhancing Eco’Services, its eco-responsible used office furniture management solution for customers.

Read 8 minutes

Sustainable development is a core component of Steelcase. For many years, the company has contributed to fighting climate change in multiple ways, by limiting waste, reducing water consumption and cutting down on packaging. This commitment is reflected in tangible action and ambitious objectives at both the international and local level.

According to Valdelia, an environmental non-profit certified by the Ministry of Ecological Transition, approximately 2 million tons of furniture reaches the end of its life cycle every year in France, including 250,000 tons generated by businesses. In total, 40% of this waste is sent to landfills and another 45% incinerated, generating significant CO_2 emissions.

In response, Steelcase took the initiative to develop an ethical and convenient service that offers a second life to office equipment no longer needed by customers. Created in 2008, Eco’Services is a turn-key building clearance and furniture recovery service, dedicated to making workstation updates a part of the circular economy by incorporating end-of-life products into new cycles. “Companies come to us to remove their office furniture when they transfer their activity to a new site or update their workspace,” explains Eco’Services Manager Anthony Boulay. “We are more than just a moving company: we provide our customers an authentic CSR asset by allowing them to extend the lifespan of furnishings and reduce their carbon footprint.”

How does Eco’Services work?

Eco’Services systematically conducts a pre-removal audit of the customer’s premises and designs a solution tailored to their needs. Based on the assessment and inventory, the furniture is removed via different streams:

Re-sale to re-use

Wherever possible, Eco’Services extends the furniture’s life cycle by reselling it with the help of its partner network, thus reducing waste. The furniture is used by small local organizations, start-ups and SMEs.

Donate to re-use

With the same goal of re-using as much furniture as possible, Eco’Services coordinates staff donation programs, a solution of interest to more and more companies with the rise of remote working. Donations also go to associations and care facilities such as the Trousseau and Necker hospitals in Paris.

Upcycling

Eco’Services works with organizations that ‘upcycle’, a recycling technique in which discarded items are used to create new products. This process, which does not require new materials, presents the advantage of being less energy intensive than recycling.

Recycling

Remaining items are sent to a recycling center, permitting the re-use of materials when that of the furniture itself is not possible: desk tops are turned into wood chips, metals are melted and re-employed, and plastics are recycled into pellets to become new raw materials.

This used furniture management service, which reduces waste to a minimum and prevents landfill disposal, is unique on the market: “We are not an intermediary,” emphasizes Anthony Boulay. “We are the only manufacturer in Europe to offer an end-to-end furniture re-use solution, and because furniture is our core business, we know the legislation inside out. Our watchword? Re-use — whenever possible.”

Eco’Services is also committed to the traceability of its operations. “Customers appreciate our transparency,” highlights Hugo Guerreiro, Eco’Services Project Manager for the Paris region. “We provide detailed documentation certifying how much is re-used and recycled, which the company can then include in their CSR report as a way of endorsing this eco-responsible approach.”

A new phase

Eco’Services entered a new phase this year. Initially, items were simply cleaned before being sold to brokers or donated to associations. Now, however, Steelcase reconditions its own chairs and desks under a new ‘Circular by Steelcase’ label. “We dismantle the furniture entirely, disinfect it, and carry out any mechanical or aesthetic repair work needed,” says Anthony Boulay. In perfect working order, the reconditioned items are sold through our network of dealers. Reconditioning is a promising sector, and we are certain that the Circular program has a bright future.”

Hugo Guerreiro agrees: “We aim to become number one on the reconditioning market by committing ourselves to higher-than-standard criteria. Specifically, we never add new components to the furniture we recondition; any spare parts are sourced from used furniture. Our signature touch is to ensure that no one can tell the difference between a reconditioned and a new product from one meter away. The result is impressive: when we present Eco’Services to potential customers, we like to have them sit in Circular chairs without telling them they are used and see their reaction. They can’t believe it when we tell them it’s not new!”

Eco’Services satisfies a real demand on the market, as many companies look for more virtuous solutions for their used furniture. They want both to improve their CSR performance and stay ahead of changes to legislation: tougher environmental regulations are coming into force in every sector as a response to the climate crisis. A new anti-waste, circular economy law adopted in February 2020 in France requires that at least 20% of furniture acquired annually by public purchasers must be second-hand, reconditioned, or include a specific percentage of recycled content.

Making economic, social and environmental goals compatible

Most companies look for solutions that source as much value as possible from their furniture assets. “Eco’Services’ reputation is really taking off, because the concept of CSR is now seen as a key challenge,” says Anthony Boulay. Many organizations today want to include a certain percentage of second-hand furniture in their purchasing practices. Some take a particularly virtuous approach by combining end-of-life furniture management with the purchase of second-hand items.”

Eco’Services also plays an active role in the social and solidarity economy — the company regularly hires people in social employment programs via its partnerships with community centers. Every ton of collected furniture creates new jobs and protects resources. “The social and solidarity economy and the circular economy share the same values in facing current and future challenges,” points out Anthony Boulay. With Eco’Services, we support a development model that makes economic concerns compatible with social and environmental ones.”

Unknown a few years ago, the Eco’Services offer is now popular among a growing number of companies and organizations. “We’re seeing very positive results,” says Anthony Boulay, pleased. “Our services now attract large groups in addition to small outfits.” This new demand is proof that sustainable development and the circular economy are no longer just promises on paper; they figure prominently in the strategies of numerous organizations. We wager Eco’Services and Circular by Steelcase will make the news again soon.

